

At the Veterans Outreach and Family Resource Center in Bennington Monday, Rep. Peter Welch announced bipartisan legislation to expand the impact of the successful Vermont Guard outreach program that helps veterans returning from deployments in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Welch's National Guard Outreach Act (H.R. 2403) will capitalize on the success of Vermont's first-of-its-kind program, expanding its reach nationwide. The Vermont program has served as a model for other states and a front-page [article](#) last year in Stars and Stripes described it as a model for the nation. Introducing the legislation with Welch is Rep. Chris Gibson (R-N.Y.), who serves on the House Armed Services Committee.

The Vermont Guard pilot program was started in 2006 with the help of federal grants secured by Sen. Bernie Sanders. Vermont's congressional delegation has since worked to ensure the program remains funded, most recently [helping to secure funding through the end of 2011](#) . The program sends outreach specialists door-to-door and provides Guard members and their families access to health care services, marriage and financial counseling, substance abuse treatment and other services that are critically important to Guard members returning from deployments. The outreach specialists are themselves veterans who can relate to the reintegration process and know well the difficulties faced by Guard members and their families.

"This legislation takes a good Vermont idea to the rest of the country," Welch said. "It is effective because Guard members do not have to seek out help – help is offered to them by trained

veterans who know their struggles.”

Welch was joined for Monday’s announcement by Brigadier General Thomas Drew, Deputy Adjutant General of the Vermont National Guard, program outreach specialists, veteran Tom Burke and a representative from Rep. Chris Gibson’s office.

H.R. 2403 was referred to the House Armed Services Committee.